

The Effect of Illegal Immigration and Drug Smuggling on Texas Agriculture

An Analysis of Hidalgo, Starr and Cameron Counties

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Abstract

Discussions on homeland security issues gained significant momentum after the attacks on September 11, 2001. While the U.S. government's focus was directed towards minimizing terrorist threats, focus is now on our own border, especially the southern border with Mexico. Illegal immigration and drug smuggling is still a significant issue and the use of violent tactics have increased for those willing to risk it all to gain entry into the United States. There are numerous reasons why people try to gain illegal entry into the U.S. and there are also numerous ways in which the United States has tried to prevent this activity but the question remains as to how these ways affect those who live on the border.

The largest portion of the U.S.-Mexico border is shared with the state of Texas. Much of this border region is land used for farming and ranching, a significant industry that contributes to the Texas economy. These farmers and ranchers who make their living off of the land are now contemplating moving elsewhere because their once peaceful life has been disrupted by illegal immigrants and drug smugglers who cut through their land on a daily basis. Some individuals have moved off of their land and into the surrounding towns and those who have stayed no longer leave their house without a gun or two.

Illegal immigration and drug smuggling has significantly impacted U.S. citizens living on the border especially those located in the lower Rio Grande Valley area of Texas. This area has seen a significant increase in illegal immigration due to the boost in the Texas economy but how will the overall impact of illegal immigration impact the economy if farmers and ranchers decide to leave their land and the agricultural industry? Therefore, this article focuses on how illegal immigration and drug smuggling has impacted the agricultural industry of Texas, especially in the lower Rio Grande Valley.

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Introduction

The Texas-Mexico border is defined by its diverse culture, large agricultural industry, as well as the seemingly never ending violence fueled by the increase in illegal immigration and drug smuggling. This violence has become part of the many rancher's and farmer's lives who make their living using the rich soil on the Texas border.

According to the Texas Department of Agriculture, "the 15 counties along the Texas border with Mexico include nearly 8,200 farms and ranches covering more than 15 million acres, accounting for nearly half of the state's fruit and vegetable production" (Texas Department of Agriculture, 2010). Farming and ranching is a major part of Texas economics and the livelihood of Texans, which begs the question of how such an important industry may be affected by illegal immigration and drug smuggling.

The increase in illegal immigration, particularly in the Rio Grande Valley area, is mirrored by the increase in apprehensions by the United States Border Patrol. The 2013 fiscal year report shows apprehensions in the Rio Grande Valley Sector numbered at 154,453, the highest since 1999 in which apprehensions numbered almost 170,000 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2013)

According to *Alliance for Agriculture Guestworker Reform*, immigrants are moving to enter into the United States through southern Texas instead of the more popular paths through Arizona. The reason for the shift is due to the boost in the state's economy as well as the desire to seek a more direct route to the U.S. (Yen, 2013). According to the Department of Homeland Security, an immigrant is any alien in the United States. An alien is an individual who is not a

U.S. citizen but an illegal alien is defined as an immigrant under the Immigration and Nationality Act (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, n.d.). Examples of people considered to be illegal immigrants include those individuals who enter the United States without authorization at unauthorized border crossings; those individuals who continue to reside in the United States with expired visas; and those individuals who violate the terms of their visas. This article focuses on the first category, those that enter the United States without authorization at unauthorized border crossings on land owned by U.S. citizens.

Some of these illegal immigrants are coming to the U.S. in search of jobs but many others have a different agenda. These illegal immigrants are drug smugglers, many of whom are paid by violent Mexican cartels and will stop at nothing to get their 'load' into the United States, frequently using violence on those who stand in their way. William Bellamy, a cattle rancher in Starr County located in the Rio Grande Valley, stated that two of his gatekeepers were attacked in February 2014 by two drug smugglers attempting to cross the border. (W. Bellamy, personal communication, March 15, 2014).

Therefore, this research article address how illegal immigration and drug smuggling has impacted Texas agriculture with the intent of answering the question: Has illegal immigration and drug smuggling *negatively* impacted Texas agriculture in the lower Rio Grande Valley? The agricultural industry on the Texas border spans over 1,500 miles therefore the area of study will focus on three counties in the Rio Grande Valley area: Hidalgo, Starr and Cameron (See Figure 1 for a map of these counties). Identifying and addressing the hardships of farm and ranch owners in these counties and evaluating the number of individuals who have terminated their operations in the area contributes to the evaluation process. Strategies already in place will be identified and new strategies will be introduced.



Figure 1. Starr, Hidalgo, and Cameron county map (Texas Bird Images, n.d.).

The Industry

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, Starr County farmers' chief crop is sorghum used for food as grain. Sorghum crops tolerate heat and drought therefore it is a choice crop for farmers on the southern tip of Texas. Starr County is also home to thousands of head of cattle. Hidalgo County produces cotton, sorghum and sugarcane while the livestock in this area include cattle, sheep and goats (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2014). Cameron County crops include cotton, sorghum and sugarcane. According to the Texas Department of Agriculture, Texas contributes approximately 3 billion pounds of sugarcane annually. "Cameron County is home to one of the few remaining sugarcane mills in the nation and is the only one located in Texas" (Texas Department of Agriculture, 2010).

New Routines

In a March 2014 interview, Pepe Guerra, a rancher and realty agent in Starr County, states that every rancher and farmer in the area carries a gun at all times. He indicated people are scared due to the weekly crossing of large groups of illegal immigrants and some of the property owners have left the area. Guerra states repairing fences and removing trash left by the illegal

immigrants has become routine for these ranchers and farmers. Not all of those who cross the border make it to their destination; many are caught but others perish in the unforgiving terrain that is the Texas-Mexico border. Ranchers, farmers and local law enforcement are responsible for the dead bodies. “People just don’t want to be there” (P. Guerra, personal communication, March 26, 2014).

Lance Walker, a rancher and realty agent in Cameron County, states that there are a few “lucky ones” who have managed to leave the area but others, like himself, are unable to leave due to financial reasons. The ranchers and farmers have their whole lives tied up in their land and it is the only way some make a living. The ones who stayed have moved off of their properties and into the surrounding towns. Walker states that he no longer locks his doors at his ranch home when he leaves. “Why lock the door when they (illegal immigrants/drug smugglers) are just going to break it down anyway? I’d rather not spend the money” (L. Walker, personal communication, March 26, 2014). Walker also stated that many of the farmers and ranchers leave food and water outside their ranch homes in hopes that the illegal immigrants and drug smugglers will leave their families alone.

The Cause

According to U.S. Border Patrol Agent Daniel Tirado, the Public Information Officer for the Rio Grande Valley Sector, “the increase of apprehensions in the Rio Grande Valley Sector can be attributed to several factors, such as Rio Grande Valley being the shortest route of travel from South and Central America into the U.S., the increase in personnel, technology and infrastructure in Rio Grande Valley, and the fact that most of the immigrants are seeking an

opportunity they may not have in their country” (D. Tirado, personal communication, March 3, 2014).

It was not long ago when the United States allowed legal migrant workers to come to the U.S. annually for seasonal work. This was known as the Bracero Program and “at its peak more than 400,000 agricultural workers came each year” (Alden, 2012). The low wages and poor working conditions led the program to be abolished in 1964, but it has not completely stopped migrant workers from coming to the U.S to look for work.

While some illegal immigrants still enter the U.S. in hopes of finding a job in the fields, more and more are using the ranches and fields they come across as a trail towards jobs in the city. Guerra states that the immigrants no longer ask for work in the area and instead continue towards cities such as Houston “hoping to get lost in the city crowds to avoid detection” (P. Guerra, personal communication, March 26, 2014).

Those not looking for work in the U.S. are more than likely employed by a Mexican drug cartel. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime *2013 World Drug Report*, “the use of illicit drugs in the United States has remained stable, at an estimated 14.9 per cent of the population aged 12 years and older in 2011, compared with 15.3 per cent in 2010. Prevalence of cannabis use has also remained stable, though at high levels” (UNODC, 2013). The continuing drug problem in the United States has created a stable market for Mexican drug cartels and their drug smugglers who bring in new product to the U.S. every day. During the 2013 fiscal year, the U.S Border Patrol intercepted almost 800,000 pounds of marijuana along with almost 2,000 pounds of cocaine in the Rio Grande Valley Sector alone. The amount of marijuana intercepted in fiscal year 2013 was the highest in Texas and second only to the

Tucson, Arizona Sector. The amount of cocaine intercepted in fiscal year 2013 was the highest in the Southwest Border region (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2013).

There has been an increased amount of violence in the Mexican states that border southern Texas. Part of this violence is the Mexican military's effort to subdue the cartels; they have been successful in numerous apprehensions including the recent February 2014 capture of Joaquin 'El Chapo' Guzman, the head of the Sinaloa cartel. The other part of the violence is due to cartels fighting over turf. Two major drug cartels, Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel, have been fighting over drug routes into south Texas for the last four years creating increased violence on the part of smugglers due to the need for one cartel to dominate over the other. The majority of



Figure 2. Cartel activity in Mexico (Stratfor, 2013).

this fighting takes place in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas which borders the Texas counties of Hidalgo and Cameron as well as, the southeast edge of Starr (Ortiz, March, 2014) (See Figure 2 above).

The violence has citizens terrified on both sides of the border and tourism to Tamaulipas has significantly decreased while the dead body counts have increased. “San Fernando, Tamps., gained notoriety in 2010 when the bodies of 72 immigrants — presumed victims of the Zetas — were discovered there in clandestine graves. Less than a year later, more than 180 more bodies were found in mass graves in the same rural area, which lies 100 miles south of McAllen” (Ortiz, January, 2014). The turf war could also result in an increase or decrease in the amount of marijuana and cocaine that crosses the border depending on which cartel dominates at the time.

Still others cross the border with a different type of cargo. Human trafficking has become more prevalent in the Rio Grande Valley with an increase in the number of stash houses found. “‘In my opinion, human trafficking has reached an all-time high in Hidalgo County,’ Sheriff Lupe Trevino said, listing the high incidence of stash houses and the frequent pursuits in which his officers engage as evidence. And unlike other parts of the northern Mexico border, the Valley has grown into a largely suburban area, with more places for stash houses to be employed than the Arizona desert or remotely-populated West Texas” (Santella, 2014) (See Figure 3 for a population density map).

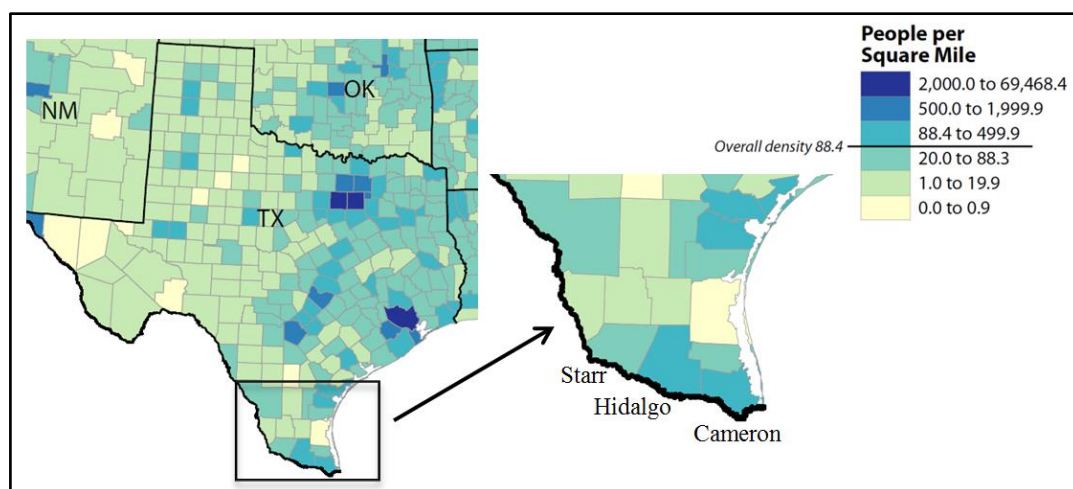


Figure 3. Population density of Texas with emphasis on Starr, Hidalgo and Cameron counties (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

According to the U.S. Border Patrol 2013 Sector Profile, of the 154,453 illegal immigrants apprehended in the Rio Grande Valley Sector, 96,829 of them were OTM or other than Mexican. (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2013). The ‘other than Mexican’ group could be comprised of victims of human trafficking who are sexually exploited or forced into the labor industry with little to no pay. According to David E. Guinn, the Executive Director of the International Human Rights Institute at DePaul University College of Law, there are approximately 14,500 to 17,500 individuals from Latin American who are trafficked into the U.S. each year, “though it appears that these figures may include victims from other parts of the world for whom Latin America is merely a transit region” (Guinn, 2010, p. 69). Human trafficking victims are trafficked from all over the world, particularly Asia and Southeast Asia. To further exacerbate this problem, when these victims are caught by law enforcement authorities, they are usually sent back to their country of origin or the last border they crossed. (Guinn, 2010, p. 81). When human trafficking victims are sent back to the last border they crossed instead of their home country they are with little or no money, without family support in the area and may also encounter a language barrier in some instances. These individuals may become prey to human traffickers again or attempt to enter the United States on their own adding to the already large number of illegal immigrants attempting to enter the U.S.

The Effects

The effects of the increase in illegal immigration and drug smuggling, as well as the violence that accompanies it, has been felt across the Rio Grande Valley. Bellamy, a cattle rancher and owner of DS Johnson McKinney Ranch in Starr County, says while some have moved in fear others have moved simply because they cannot make a living off of the land. He

states that generational farmers and ranchers, such as himself, “will not leave” (W. Bellamy, personal communication, March 15, 2014). Bellamy’s family has owned the ranch since 1908 and though he believes the violence has increased, he states that he and other ranchers in the area will not give up their land.

According to Guerra and Walker, real estate values have decreased. Guerra states that while people may not be moving out in large numbers, there are not any people moving in to the area and he has been unable to sell properties used for ranching and farming. “In a time when farm land values are exceptionally strong, thousands of acres of this prime property is currently available for below market value, yet few potential buyers are giving the property a second look. ‘A lot of good farm and ranch land along the river has been valued at \$5,000 an acre, but currently we can’t find a buyer for the property at \$2,500 an acre because no one wants to gamble on the dangers that come with it,’ stated Terry Urdal, a farm and ranch realtor located in McAllen, Hidalgo County, Texas” (Hawkes, 2012). In comparing these statements with the corresponding county appraisal districts, research shows that there are indeed decreasing land values on a few of the listings on the market but others show no change. However, the author’s past experience as a title company employee has determined that these values are not always accurate because the land must be assessed each year and most often this is done by the land owner who may not return these questionnaires. Furthermore, different assessors may determine different values on the same land.

Another issue concerning the ranch and farm land in the area is the border wall separating Mexico and the United States. “The wall was built (by the U.S. government) to satisfy a law, passed in 2006 and 2008, that authorized 700 miles of fence on the southern border, 315 miles of it in Texas. President Bush said the fence would make the border safer and was ‘an important

step toward immigration reform” (Goodwin, 2011). Though it is referred to as the border fence, it does not actually sit directly on the border; instead it is located a few miles to the north of the border and many land owners have ended up on the Mexican side, adding to their frustration (See Figure 4 below for a photo of the border fence). The land located between the Texas-Mexico border and the wall patrolled by U.S. Border Patrol agents has become “no man’s land”, meaning the land that was once used for crops or cattle is avoided. (L. Walker, personal communication, March 26, 2014). Residents in the Rio Grande Valley are thankful for the effort



Figure 4. “South Texas Border Fence Line and Camera” by Donna Burton/U.S. Customs and Border Protection is licensed by CC BY-SA 2.0

put forth in strengthening border security but the fence has created more problems and many feel that it does not actually work as a deterrent. Tim Loop, a farmer in Cameron County, states that

there are still gaps in the fence and people are able to climb over areas of the fence that do not have gaps. (Goodwin, 2011). The border wall has become so unpopular among border residents that there is a website dedicated to explaining why the wall does not work and how damaging it is including blocking the flow of wildlife, affecting flood waters and ultimately farm land (No Border Wall, n.d.).

Other effects of the increase in illegal immigration and drug smuggling include the constant repairing of fences, cattle lost or mixed up with other cattle and in some cases, cattle have died due to water sources being used up by those crossing the border.

Bryan Black, Director of Communications with the Texas Department of Agriculture, states:

“The generals (General Barry R. McCaffrey and retired Major General Robert H. Scales – authors of *Texas Border Security: A Strategic Military Assessment*) agree our farmers, ranchers and rural residents – along with our urban areas – are under attack by cartels that rely daily on tactics such as murder, kidnapping, human smuggling, transnational arms shipments and blackmail to carry out their illegal trade to distributor gangs in hundreds of American cities. Those same gangs help facilitate illegal commerce that pushes drugs into America while sending illegal weapons and cash into Mexico. The report says between \$19 billion and \$39 billion in illicit proceeds move through southwestern border “bulk smuggling” operations to Mexico each year” (B. Black, personal communication, April 4, 2014).

These violent tactics utilized by the drug smugglers have created life and death situations for U.S. Border Patrol agents. On Wednesday, March 12, 2014, “a man attacked a Border Patrol agent, wrestled away the agent’s pistol, pointed the weapon at him and squeezed the trigger. But the gun apparently jammed” (Hendricks, 2014). The agents apprehended eight illegal immigrants including the attacker. Fortunately, there was no loss of life.

Just two days later, on Friday, March 14, another Border Patrol agent was attacked in his patrol vehicle. “Authorities say a Border Patrol agent in Starr County opened fire through his own windshield at the marijuana-packed vehicle that was ramming his head-on” (Antonacci,

2014). Again there was no loss of life and the suspect was apprehended. Almost 800 pounds of marijuana was seized from the vehicle. (Antonacci, 2014). These attacks took place within approximately 70 miles of each other in the Rio Grande Valley.

Enforcement

According to the Protect Your Texas Border website, U.S. Border Patrol agents are lower in number on the Texas border than other border states, therefore they are severely out-numbered by the illegal immigrants and drug smugglers who cross the border daily (Texas Department of Agriculture, 2012) (See Figure 5). The result is low morale among the agents. It does not help that many agents feel as though they are unable to do their job due to the “catch and release” tactic employed by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection. If the illegal immigrants they apprehend are not criminals, they are sent back to Mexico only to try and cross the border again days or weeks later. In fact, illegal immigrants who have been convicted of crimes may also get released. “Federal immigration officials last year (2013) charge only one of every four ‘deportable’ illegal immigrants and released more than a third of those convicted of crimes, according to a new report based on data from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) itself” (Tabirian, 2014).

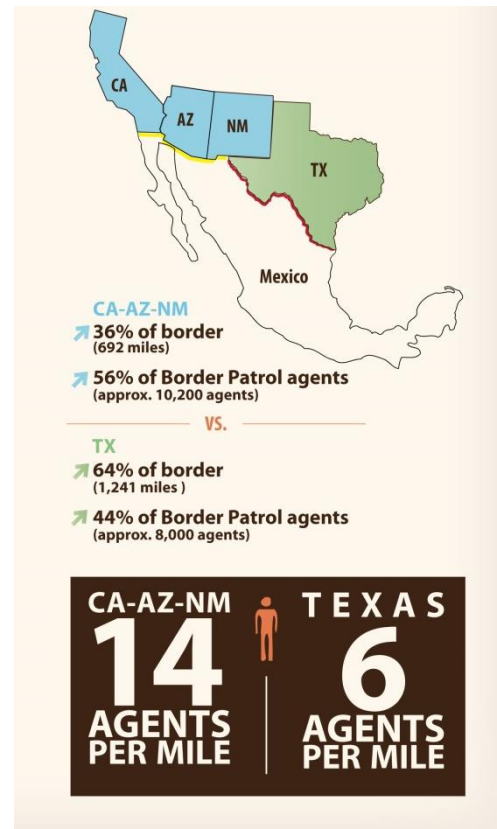


Figure 5. Miles of border and number of Border Patrol agents (Texas Department of Agriculture, 2012).

Supervisory Border Patrol Agent Rush Carter, Big Bend Sector, states that 98 percent of the Texas border is private property therefore it is imperative to have good relationships with those ranchers and farmers. Carter states that much of the information they receive on groups of illegal immigrants come from these individuals. (R. Carter, personal communication, February 27, 2014). Still others are scared to say anything out fear of retribution from the cartels as the author discovered in conducting research for this article; many phone messages were not returned and conversations over the phone ended abruptly.

The opposite end of that spectrum is know as the Texas Border Volunteers, a group of individuals who “regularly conduct watches in South Texas. Teams are deployed on private property and report trespassers to the Border Patrol” (Texas Border Volunteers, 2014). They have helped the U.S. Border Patrol and local law enforcement make numerous apprehensions (See Figure 6 below).



Figure 6. “March watch: A portion of a group of 41 IAs (illegal aliens) apprehended by Border Patrol” by Texas Border Volunteers. Copyright 2014 Texas Border Volunteers.

There are several groups that work together to try and keep the Texas-Mexico border safe including U.S. Border Patrol agents, the Texas Border Volunteers, local law inforcement as well as Texas Rangers who utilize Ranger Reconnaissance Teams, “the tactical combat elements

in the war against narco-terrorists” (McCaffrey & Scales, 2011, p. 12). Technology is also used to keep another ‘eye’ on the border such as cameras. Walls have been put in place in some areas but have created more costs in repairs to the fence due to illegal aliens cutting holes to gain access. These walls have created more frustration for some farmers and ranchers as noted in a previous section.

“Resources remain the greatest impediment to the expansion and continued success of the Rangers’ border war against the cartels. Budget cuts for DHS, its Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the United States Coast Guard USCG) have severely constrained the ability of Texas to rely on its federal partners and their resources to expand border operations” (McCaffrey & Scales, 2011, p. 13).

To add to the issue of limited resources, corruption runs rampant among law enforcement agencies along the border especially the local sheriff’s departments. In the course of developing this article, the Hidalgo County Sheriff Lupe Trevino resigned on Monday, April 14, 2014, after pleading guilty to money laundering. The money, estimated to be between \$70,000 and \$120,000, was used in Trevino’s campaign for re-election and was tied to a known drug trafficker (The Associated Press, 2014). Trevino’s own son and two other Hidalgo County deputies were arrested in a 2013 drug sting. “Nine other lawmen, including Jonathan Trevino, the sheriff’s son, have been convicted on drug charges relating to the (drug) task force, known as the Panama Unit” (The Associated Press, 2014). According to KRGV, an ABC News affiliate in Rio Grande Valley, Sheriff Trevino joins a list of other sheriffs who gave into temptation

including another from Hidalgo County, two from Starr County and one from Cameron County – the three counties that are the focus of this article (KRGV, 2014).

New Solutions

The *Texas Border Security: A Strategic Military Assessment* report has outlined several new solutions that could be implemented in the battle to make the U.S. border more secure especially the Texas border. “Border control will always remain imperfect; it is not possible for the United States to create a perfectly secure border, and that should not be the goal” but the violence experienced by many on the border region is unacceptable. (Alden, 2012). “The lack of security and disregard for Americans’ safety cannot be what our founding fathers had in mind when they penned the United States Constitution and specifically outlined the federal government’s responsibility to protect American soil and citizens from foreign invaders” (B. Black, personal communication, April 4, 2014).

Black states that one solution is to implement a guest worker program for those illegal immigrants crossing the border primarily in search of jobs. Others, such as Guerra, Walker, and Bellamy, believe the first step is to enforce the laws already in place. This solution is also backed by Texas Agricultural Commissioner Todd Staples, “businesses must be accountable for illegally hiring and employing undocumented workers; immigrants and guest workers must be held responsible for entering the United States illegally; they must enter legally and uphold the laws of our nation through their stay and government must uphold its responsibility to prosecute those who violate our laws” (Staples, n.d.).

Another solution, apart from the much needed funding to secure the border, is increasing the number of U.S. Border Patrol agents in the area; an act that was just recently implemented in

April 2014. “As part of the South Texas Campaign (STC), U.S. Customs and Border Protection has brought in additional resources and more than 100 Border Patrol agents to the Rio Grande Valley Sector to assist with the targeted enforcement efforts against transnational criminal organizations” (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2014).

Conclusion

Has illegal immigration and drug smuggling negatively affected Texas agriculture? Damage has been done to farm lands in the form of trash and human waste, cattle have been lost due to cut fences and some families have moved away, selling their farms and ranches. The agriculture industry itself has not been impacted significantly enough to raise prices or negatively impact the Texas economy. Prices of crops and beef in the Rio Grande Valley area have fluctuated over the last few years but there may be any number of factors that contribute including weather, pests, financial reasons, as well as damage done by illegal immigrants crossing through the fields but illegal immigration and drug smuggling in and of itself is not the primary cause of price fluctuations. That may change over the next few years if the rise in violence is not addressed.

The increase in violence on the border and the fear these farmers and ranchers experience on a daily basis should not be overlooked. Texans have shown that they will protect their land and their families but how much longer will they be able to hold out without help from the federal government? As Agricultural Commissioner Staples states, “until Washington stands beside us, Texas is prepared to take matters into its own hands to the fullest extent possible” (Protect Your Texas Border, 2014).

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